

CORNWELL RANCH CONSERVATION EASEMENT

Montana Board of Land Commissioners

November 2008

Agency: Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Land Interest: Conservation Easement

Cost/Value: FWP proposes to **purchase a conservation easement on the 24,000-acre Cornwell Ranch near Glasgow for the cost of \$5,050,000 (\$210/acre)**. Primary funding source is FWP's Habitat Montana program, with additional funds likely from the upland game bird account, Montana Fish & Wildlife Conservation Trust, North American Wetland Conservation Act, and USFWS State Wildlife Grants.

Property Size/Location: **Approximately 24,000 acres in Valley and Phillips counties.** The property consists of **numerous parcels along the Milk River** between Saco to Glasgow, and **expansive tracts of native short-grass prairie and green ash riparian forest** in the Buggy Creek drainage northwest of Glasgow. The ranch holds grazing leases on more than 100,000 acres of surrounding public land managed by the BLM and Montana DNRC.

Resource Values: **The Cornwell Ranch conservation easement will conserve important habitat, and provide outstanding public hunting opportunities on the ranch and adjoining public lands, along with fishing access to the Milk River.** The ranch hosts a diversity of wildlife species, with **strong populations of whitetail and mule deer, antelope, sage grouse, sharp-tailed grouse, turkey, pheasants and waterfowl.** The riparian habitat along the Milk River and Buggy Creek supports **a diversity of migratory songbirds,** while the **prairie is a globally significant location for a number of at-risk species of grassland birds.** Native prairie will be protected from sodbusting under the easement, and cattle grazing will be managed by rest-rotation.

Process: **FWP Draft Environmental Assessment** was released on May 8, 2008, and comments were accepted through May 28. The proposal received strong public support. **Decision Notice** was issued by FWP on June 2, 2008, recommending purchase of the conservation easement. (Land Board was provided with EA, Decision Notice and other backup materials in June.) **FWP Commission final approval** on October 16, 2008.



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

DATE: September 5, 2008
TO: Cornwell Ranch CE File
CC: Wildlife Division
FROM: FWP Lands Bureau
SUBJECT: Resolution of DNRC Management Issues for Cornwell Conservation Easement

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, DNRC and Cornwell Ranch worked together through the month of August 2008 to resolve outstanding issues related to potential impacts of the proposed conservation easement on state school trust land. All issues have been fully resolved, as summarized below.

1. The 30,000-acre block of school trust land along the eastern boundary of Cornwell Ranch has been removed from the conservation easement's grazing management plan. Cornwell Ranch will continue to operate in a manner consistent with the terms of its existing DNRC grazing leases. The conservation easement will have no impact on DNRC's management of this land, nor will it affect DNRC's ability to seek competitive bids for the tract at the time of future grazing lease renewals.
2. As requested by DNRC, Cornwell Ranch has submitted applications under the land-banking program to begin the process of purchasing the four isolated state school trust parcels that lie within the ranch boundaries. Cornwell Ranch has additionally pledged to set aside in escrow approximately \$1 million for the purchase; these funds will consist of a portion of the proceeds received by Cornwell Ranch from the sale of the conservation easement to FWP. These steps set the course for DNRC to receive full fair market value for these parcels, and address DNRC's concern that the parcels could be difficult for the agency to manage once the conservation easement is in place.
3. The language in the conservation easement has been revised to allow for new access roads to reach the two sections of state school trust land that currently do not have road access. In the event that the land-banking process (as described in item #2 above) does not proceed to completion, the conservation easement will not interfere with DNRC obtaining appropriate access to all of its lands in the conservation easement area.